

Fear and Hope and Happy Endings
Based on Mark 16:1-8
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I once came across a Sunday school retelling of this story, that ended with the women running away from the tomb, as we just read, but in that version the women were shouting, “Happy, happy Easter Day!”

I suspect that if the author of this gospel were to read that children’s Bible story, he would shake his head in confusion. Happy? That’s not the gospel I wrote! That’s not the word I heard. The women go through a whole range of emotions, actually. They’re sad on their way to the tomb, surely, but also worried, “who will roll away the stone?” They’re surprised to see the young man there and the stone already rolled away and the tomb empty. Then they hear from the man—he’s not here, he has been raised, go tell everyone he’ll meet you in Galilee! But instead of being overjoyed, instead of shouting out “happy, happy Easter day!” the women run away terrified, and never tell anyone.

But then, the author of Mark’s gospel is a little weird, let’s face it. He tells us nothing about Jesus’ birth or ancestry, then devotes a whole chapter to everything Jesus ever said about the end of time (Mark 13) and two chapters to Jesus’ trial, suffering, and death (Mark 14-15). And eight verses to his resurrection.

Mark seems very much in a hurry, generally, as though he has to get the story out there quickly, before the world ends, before we stop listening, or maybe before we hear it from someone else who’s getting it wrong. He’s talking fast, without pausing for good grammar or smooth transitions. He’d get a D in English composition. It’s the content of Mark’s message that draws us, definitely not the charming flow of his prose.

The author of this gospel reminds me in that sense of Bob Dylan. Like Dylan, Mark doesn’t care about sounding beautiful, because he’s so focused on the message he wants to get across. And as Bob Dylan songs have been re-sung, more melodiously, with better harmonica work, by many other artists, so Mark’s story was retold, by other gospel writers, more smoothly, with better grammar. But what sends us back to both Dylan and Mark is that urgent, mysterious, rough around the edges message. And the sense that maybe we are losing something of that message when we smooth it out.

So in this gospel, we hear that Jesus is resurrected, but we never see him resurrected. We hear the story of his being raised, but where it gets really weird is that we are told that that story never gets told.

It's a little like a Zen koan. How many people know what a Zen koan is, please raise your hand. But you do know at least one Zen koan. Namely, if a tree falls in the forest and no one hears it---complete that thought _____. Also, what's the sound of one hand clapping, that's a zen koan.

From my very limited knowledge of Buddhism, I gather that a koan is meant to play with your sense of logic and so kind of bump you out of thinking logically, or linearly. It's meant to produce a sort of that-does-not-compute moment that forces you to think outside the box.

The end of Mark's gospel is like that—maybe for similar reasons. Because if the women were so scared that they never told anyone, how do we know all of this? How does the gospel writer know? It's a story that eats itself, precluding its own existence. Which is ironic, I guess, or just fitting, because throughout this gospel, Jesus has been telling people who recognize him as the Messiah, “don't tell anyone!” The women are maybe the only people in the whole gospel who actually don't.

But somehow the story gets told anyway. Maybe the women didn't have to tell anyone, at least not in words. Maybe it's the same way that no one has to tell us that the sun rose this morning. We can feel the warmth and see the light. To *quote* Bob Dylan, “You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”

Maybe the story tells itself, in some mysterious, Zen koan kind of way. But it's important to remember that the story of Mark's gospel, however we manage to hear it, does not give us a happy ending. It barely gives us an ending at all. Why, when resurrection, victory over death, is surely such good news, why aren't the women at the tomb overjoyed? Why doesn't the young man at the tomb say, “rejoice!” rather than, “don't be alarmed.” Also, it would be easier to rejoice at this ending if we could hear a word from the resurrected Jesus, thank you very much.

New Testament scholar Brian Blount writes that the gospel ends this way because Mark's focus is not on resurrection but on discipleship. Therefore, Mark doesn't end with appearances of the resurrected Jesus or scenes where various disciples are

convinced and the good news is spread. Mark ends with the women's fear. "Fear," Blount writes "is the natural reaction to a discipleship whose content is the way of the cross. If you're not afraid, you don't understand."

Ta-Nahisi Coates' book, *Between the World and Me*, lays out the author's understanding of his own growing up, and of the forces that constantly threaten the lives and physical safety of African Americans. Coates said of the book, it's not a story with a happy ending. That seems to be the point. There may be hope for racial equity in this country, hope for the relationship in particular between law enforcement and African Americans to move toward trust and justice. But it's a long haul, Coates is saying, and we hope for a future that is as yet unimaginable.

The important thing, for Coates, and maybe for Mark's gospel too, is that we are awake to reality, and that we have just enough hope to do something about it.

Brian Blount urges Christians to "stop looking for happy endings, and, living a life of discipleship, start creating them."

This is Mark's message, and it's still worth hearing. What God is doing is mysterious and even scary. What God is doing is very, very hard to put into words. But none of that is important. Because despite our fears and confusion, despite how hard it is for us to tell the good news the way it should be told, nevertheless the resurrection happens. Maybe there's a sense in which the story doesn't even have to be told and retold. The important thing is that it happens. The important thing is that, as Mary Poppins says in her return appearance, "everything is possible; even the impossible."

When we formed a fellowship group here for folks who've been widowed, we struggled for a while to come up with a name, and we tried out a couple of possibilities, until we finally hit on the name, The Next Chapter—regrouping, figuring out what life looks like in this new phase. But the very next group email that went around those folks had the subject heading, "The Last Chapter." I kind of had to rush in, no no! Not the *end* of the book! Not waiting to slam the cover shut! Just the *next* chapter!

Maybe Mark 16 is not actually the last chapter. This gospel, this morning of resurrection, it isn't a happy ending. But maybe that's because it isn't an ending at all. It's an *opening*. Even the finality of death isn't final—the stone that was meant to close off the tomb forever, the great full stop of a sacred life, that stone has been rolled away, leaving an open tomb and an open-ended story. Jesus isn't here, says

the young man at the tomb—he's out there, a living and life-giving force. Don't stay here among the dead, acting as though this story is over, go be a part of what happens next. Amen.